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## Exploration and Discovery

### THE ASSUAN ARAMAIC PAPYRI

Far up the eastern bank of the Nile, near its first cataract, lies a little town whose claim to distinction is destined to be recognized. Here lay the quarries from which the granite of many Egyptian monuments was hewn; and here the British government performed the mighty engineering feat of damming up the waters of the Nile. Once more Assuan attracts attention, but this time as the site of the discovery of a collection of Aramaic manuscripts, outranking in number and age all previously known Aramaic documents. The place itself is one of great antiquity. Its Egyptian name was SWN.<sup>1</sup> By the Greeks it was called Syene. Some scholars find trace of it in Ezek. 29:10; 30:6, and, by a slight emendation, in 30:15,16. It was a twin fortress of Yeb (now Elephantinè), situated opposite Syene on an island in the river, standing out on the southern border, protecting Egypt from the Soudanese tribes.

The papyri, ten in number, seem to have been unearthed by workmen engaged in constructing a short line of railway. In the spring of 1904 they were acquired by Robert Mond, M.A., F.R.S.E., and by Lady William Cecil, the former obtaining papyri C, D, F, H, J, and part of G, which are now in the Cairo Museum, and the latter B, E, K, and the other part of G. A and L, belonging to the Bodleian Library and procured earlier, are of the same class. All are published, with transliterations and translations, by A. E. Cowley in an admirable treatise under the editorship of A. A. Sayce.

They were found in a wooden box, in such perfect condition that even the clay seals fastening the strings round them were intact. They are dated in the years 471 to 411 B. C. In each case the day of the Jewish month is given, followed by the corresponding day of the Egyptian month and the reigning year of the Persian king. It will be noticed that they fall within the reigns of Xerxes, Artaxerxes, and Darius Nothus. If we recall that Nehemiah and Ezra were active in Jerusalem during the latter part of this period, we shall better appreciate the temporal advantages of these colonists over their contemporaries in Jerusalem. The papyri represent the business documents of a family through three generations. Were they buried for safe-keeping in the hour of impending calamity?

<sup>1</sup> Literally "a market"—the trading-post for the Soudan.

Was the Jewish colony, or at least this family, destroyed in it? Was it a Soudanese raid, or did it occur in the revolt of the native princes against the Persian domination about the year 410 B. C., when these documents cease? Some sudden fate befell their owner and preserved them for our day. Thus we find ourselves possessed of a unique class of manuscripts coming from the fifth century B. C., unharmed by the mistakes and alterations of a succession of copyists.

It is with no little interest that we find a Jewish colony in Egypt a century after Jeremiah. According to Jer. 44:1, 15, such a colony was at Pathros in Upper Egypt in the prophet's day. The intolerable conditions at home induced the Jews to go far and wide enjoying the opportunities of trade afforded by other lands. A century has passed and the Jew is still there—a part of the community, at home in the new land, in worship independent of Zion, in business a merchant prince to the humble dwellers in Judah.

Linguistically the documents are of some importance. They show that Aramaic was the official tongue of the western half of the Persian Empire in the fifth century B. C. They bear evidence also of its character at a date preceding Ezra, parts of whose book and the later Book of Daniel are written in this tongue. New words and forms not occurring previously are added to our present lists. The name of "Jehovah" is especially interesting. Most readers are aware that this is a coined word invented by the Jew to obviate the difficulty of using the Divine name, which came to be considered too holy for man to utter. What the original was is doubtful, but since the time of Ewald general acceptance has favored the pronunciation "Yahweh." In these documents it is written יהו and once יהוה. Cowley thinks this would point to a pronunciation "Yahu." It is written in an exactly similar way in the business documents of the eastern Jews of the same period.<sup>2</sup> This component in Hebrew names—such as "Malchiah" (Jer. 38:6)—and the shorter form "Yah" assume a suggestive significance in the light of these records.

Paleographically the characters are what tradition says Ezra introduced on his return to Jerusalem. They preserve a wonderful similarity, due to execution by a professional scribe. In sharp contrast to this regular script, the names of the witnesses present all manner of individual variations. The documents afford us access to the period between the use of the long, simple character of the writing on stone, and the final "square design." The words are carefully spaced, and due regard is paid to punctuation.

<sup>2</sup> Clay, *Business Documents of the Murashu Sons of Nippur*, Vol. X.

The stroke appearing after numbers is probably for this purpose, though it may indicate an extra numeral.

To most the religious evidence of these papyri will be the object of chief research. However, being business documents, their religious interest is secondary. Despite this fact, they reveal a religious condition which is most instructive. The Yah element in the proper names shows that there was as yet no religious superstition concerning the pronouncing of the Divine name. In E<sup>5</sup> Mibhtahyah swears, not by Yahu, but by Sati, the Egyptian goddess—the local goddess of the cataract. Yahu and Sati seem to be little distinguished. Yahu is the god of the Hebrews, just as Sati is of the Egyptians. We find a witness to a deed of the year 465 B. C., named Hosea, the son of Peti-Khnum (the gift of Khnum), which would bear evidence to some recognition of the Egyptian deities. The altar (which must have presupposed a chapel) of Yahu by the side of the king's road in Elephantinê (B<sup>11</sup>; J<sup>6</sup>; E<sup>14</sup>) is of commanding evidence. These Jews could not have entertained any thought of the exclusive right of Zion to Yahu's altar, such as that of the straggling remnant which came out of Babylonia. If this had been a synagogue after the manner of the eastern institution, it had created no surprise, but an altar of Yahu is remarkable. Yet is this not in accord with Isa. 19:19, and does the founding of the temple of Onias near Leontopolis seem revolutionary in the presence of this event?

The tolerance enjoyed by the Jew is attested by this altar or shrine. He was granted equal privileges in law and commerce. We find Jews in business, possessing houses, property, slaves, engaging in finance and various pursuits. One has attained to the office of Persian official—"handiz<sup>3</sup> in the citadel" (E<sup>4</sup>). We discover racial intermarriage. It is evidenced by the names of the father and son frequently pointing to different nationalities. Mibhtahyah, the Jewess, after the death of her husband takes As-Hor, the Egyptian royal builder, as a second husband. The Jews do not seem to have enjoyed full citizenship, though this privilege was accorded the Babylonians, who exercise equal rights with the Persians in the matter of holding office. The status of the Jew is modified by a term which seems to denote "in the following of," and is always followed by some name—likely that of a Persian official. Sayce thinks this may denote assignment to a special quarter of the city over which this official had jurisdiction, and for whose safety and order he was responsible. Though these documents are mostly drawn up in Syene, it would seem that the strictly Jewish colony was confined to Elephantinê—probably

<sup>3</sup> Modern Arabic *muhandiz* is "engineer."

on the northwest side of the ancient city just west of the temple of Amenhotep III—for these alone are strictly termed “Arameans,” those of Syene being given the general Semitic cognomen. Here all nationalities of the oriental world are mingled together. In the witnesses to these various documents appear the names of Babylonians, Persians, Arabs, Egyptians, Jews, and those of uncertain nationality. Such freedom and equality are unusual for the East. Woman shares in this liberty. We find her prominent in the business activities. Mibhtahyah, according to one document, conducts a wholesale house for builders’ supplies.

These social advantages were even surpassed by the legal privileges accorded the Jewish population of Syene. In the civil(?) court they have equal status with other races. This “Court of the Ebir” appears to exercise authority in cases demanding an oath of expurgation only. All processes of judicial investigation and decision are *ultra vires*. Such matters were reserved for the “tribunal of Napha,” whose magistrate was the Persian prefect—the governor of the garrison at Syene. There is no trace of Jewish law and possibly little of Egyptian. Following the Egyptian rule, legitimacy through the mother is observed. The sons of the Egyptian As-Hor are not citizens, but dependents. From a change of name which he assumes he may have become a Jewish proselyte, and this may account for the status of his sons. Babylonian law is apparent in this régime. The conquering Persians were wise enough to retain this noblest possession of the conquered empire. Testamentary power concerning property, its conveyance and alienation, penalties incurred by false claim and refusal to recognize legal obligations, all revert to ancient Babylonian law. To the Hammurabi Code—the substructure of present national laws—there is the closest affinity in so far as these documents relate. The rights exercised by woman under these laws call for comment. She could will property as she wished and determine its succession after death. In respect of divorce she held equal rights with the man. How far advanced these are on her status in the Old Testament! Each had the privilege of pronouncing a sentence of divorce, but in either case, to be lawful, it must be so declared in the public “assembly.” The party pronouncing divorce lost the gift brought at marriage by the other party. Papyrus G gives a marriage contract of great detail and interest. Five shekels constitute the *mohar* (Gen. 34:12) given to the father-in-law. The bridegroom’s gift to his bride comprises all kinds of clothing and household articles most highly prized in the East. In the nature of the case the marriage settlement which the bride brought with her (Josh. 15:19) is not stated, but implied in the details for a future contingency.

One of the documents, a deed of gift, is here given in full as translated by Mr. Cowley:

On the 3rd of Chisleu, that is the 10th day of the month Mesore, the 19th year of Artaxerxes the king, said Mahseiah the son of Yedoniah, an Aramaean of Syene, belonging to the quarter of Warizath, to Miphtahyah his daughter, saying: "I have given thee the house which Meshullam the son of Zaccur, the son of Ater, an Aramaean of Syene, gave me for its price, and wrote a deed for me in regard to it, and I have given it to Miphtahyah my daughter in return for the goods which she gave me when I was *hndz* in (the) citadel. I took them in exchange, and did not find money and goods to pay thee. Therefore I have given thee this house in return for those thy goods, equivalent to the sum of 5 kebhes, and I have given thee the original deed which was w(ritten) for me by the said Meshullam respecting it. This house I have given to thee, and have renounced all claim to it; it is thine, and thy children's after thee, and to whom(soever thou desire)st thou mayest give it. I shall have no power, I and my children, and my descendants, and any one else, to institute against thee suit or process on account of this house which I have given thee, and about which I have written the deed for thee. Whoever shall raise against thee suit or process, (whether) I myself or brother or sister, relative or stranger, foreign resident or citizen, he shall pay thee the sum of 10 kebhes, (and the) house is assuredly thine. Moreover, no one else shall be able to produce against thee a deed, whether new or old, except this deed which I have written and given thee. (Who)ever shall pro(duce) against thee a deed, I have not w(ritten it). Moreover, behold these are the boundaries of this house; at the upper end of it is the house of Ye' or the son of (Pe)nuliah, at its lower end the chapel of the god Yahu; east of it the house of Gadol the son of Oshea and the street running between them; west of it is (the land) of Marduk(??) the son of Palto, the priest of the gods (Khnun and Sa)ti: This house I have given to thee, and have renounced all claim to it, it is thine for ever; and to (whom)soever thou shalt wish, give (it). Nathan the son of Ananiah has written this deed at the dictation of Mahseiah, and the witnesses are—Mahseiah has written it for himself—; Mithhasah(?) the son of Mithhasdah(?), and S(atibarzanes) the son of Athar-ili the silversmith, witness Barbari the son of Dargi the silversmith of the fire-temple(?), (witness . . . ) the son of Shemaiah, Zaccur the son of Shallum.

These documents are invaluable to all students of the life of the Hebrews as shedding light upon a section of that life hitherto practically unknown to us. They reflect for us the ordinary, everyday activities and thoughts of the exiled Jews in Egypt. They afford us an insight into their social, commercial, and religious environment, and enable us to see against what tremendous odds the exiled Jew maintained his racial purity and his faith.

R. H. MODE